



Press Release

Alicia Tate-Nadeau

Director

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 20, 2021

CONTACT:

Rebecca.B.Clark@Illinois.gov

State of Illinois Launches New School Safety Initiative, Safe2Help Illinois

24/7 program encourages students to confidentially share school safety concerns

SPRINGFIELD – As part of America’s Safe Schools Week, a week dedicated to raising awareness of school safety, Governor JB Pritzker is announcing the launch of a new statewide school safety initiative called Safe2Help Illinois.

“I directed my administration to launch a statewide school violence prevention help line because our kids are safer when they have a confidential avenue to speak up for the mental health of their peers and themselves,” **said Governor JB Pritzker.** “By encouraging kids to seek help before harm, we’re making it so school officials, mental health professionals, and area law enforcement are better equipped to help prevent suicides, bullying, school violence or other threats to school and student safety. It’s another way we can bring mental health struggles out of the shadows and ensure our schools are places where students can be nurtured and thrive.”

Safe2Help Illinois is available 24/7, and at no cost to all school districts in the state. In the absence of a trusted adult, students can use a free app, text/phone, or the website (Safe2HelpIL.com) to share school safety issues in a confidential environment. Information obtained by Safe2Help Illinois will remain confidential to ensure student privacy and to protect the integrity of the program. This program is not intended to suspend, expel or punish students; rather, the goal is to encourage students to “Seek Help Before Harm.”

Safe2Help/2222

Once vetted, the information will be shared immediately with local school officials, mental health professionals and/or local law enforcement, depending on the nature of the information. The program also will help local officials by connecting them with mental health resources or other appropriate tools to intervene and help students before they harm themselves or others.

Changing the Culture in Illinois Schools

Safe2Help Illinois is more than just an information sharing platform. This is a long-term initiative to change the school culture in Illinois. Safe2Help Illinois also provides free educational resources to schools that can be introduced into their existing curriculum for students in Kindergarten through 12th grade.

"Through the Safe2Help Illinois initiative, our administration is empowering young people to care for themselves while also looking after their community at schools," said **Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton**. "As rates of anxiety, depression and other mental disorders in children continue to increase across the country, it is important we give young people the resources they need to reach emotional wellness. That is a major part of our mission to make Illinois the best state to raise our children."

"Mental health is even more of a priority during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students have experienced feelings of isolation, the loss of family income, or the death of a loved one, and I am thankful that Safe2Help Illinois will provide an additional layer of support as students return to in-person learning this fall," said **State Superintendent of Education Dr. Carmen I. Ayala**. "The program connects students with a trusted and trained adult, and the educational resources help remove the stigma associated with mental health issues and foster kindness among students' peers."

"Thanks to the leadership of Governor JB Pritzker, students across the state of Illinois have another resource where safety comes first. Prioritizing the mental health of students is critical," said **Secretary Grace B. Hou, Secretary, Illinois Department of Human Services**. IDHS' Division of Mental Health is proud to partner with ISBE and IEMA on this significant initiative for students. At IDHS, we are committed to advancing access to mental health to students and families across the state."

Safe2Help Illinois is a free, voluntary program offered to public and private schools (grades K-12) in Illinois. Regardless of whether a school district is enrolled in the program, Safe2Help staff will vet all information received and forward to the appropriate local contact whether or not they elect to formally participate in the program. Calls that reference immediate threats would be route to 9-1-1 for immediate assistance.

Safe2Help/3333

During the 2020-2021 school year, 19 schools participated in a Safe2Help Illinois pilot program. Of those schools, while serving in different capacities of remote learning and in-person learning, the pilot program saw the following calls for assistance: Suicidal Ideation, Bullying/Harassment, Fighting, Self-Harm, and Sex Assault. To date, more than 31 schools are registered with the program, resulting in more than 130 interactions with the public over the last 11 months. Educators enrolled in the program have credited the program with the successful intervention of potential suicides and sexual assaults.

Behind the Call

During a crisis, the person on the receiving end of the call has the most important job: to remain calm and provide the necessary resources to successfully defuse a situation. The analyst taking the calls for Safe2Help Illinois have experience and education in social service and community stabilization settings. As part of their onboarding process, analysts are required to complete 40-hours of training, plus an additional 20 hours of ongoing training each quarter. This includes handling suicidal or homicidal callers, responding to imminent danger, caring for very young callers, mandated reporter training and more. The Safe2Help call center analyst speak multiple languages and have access to 24-hour immediate translator services in 24 different language.

Expanding School Safety in Illinois

Safe2Help Illinois is a product of a statewide school safety capability assessment, following the 2018 school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. The Illinois Terrorism Task Force convened a School Safety Working Group made up of state and local law enforcement professionals, representatives from statewide education associations, emergency management and mental health professionals to identify school safety issues and come up with practical recommendations to improve our student safety. The cornerstone of the group's school safety recommendations is the formation of a statewide resource for students, schools and local officials, called Safe2Help Illinois.

“In almost every case involving a mass school shooting there was someone, usually a fellow student, who had some advance warning or reason to believe that violence was possible,” **said Alicia Tate-Nadeau, Director of the Illinois Emergency Management Agency.** “Safe2Help Illinois provides a free and confidential platform for students to share information, 24-hours a day. In the absence of a trusted adult, Safe2Help Illinois aims to help today's youth seek help before harm.”

Although the origins of the workgroup recommendations intended to address the threat of school violence, the program evolved to provide resources to support a student's social, behavioral and mental health needs. Prior to COVID-19, similar school safety initiatives throughout the nation found the two most common issues of concern have been threats of suicide and bullying.

Safe2Help/4444

Call to Action

Safe2Help Illinois is encouraging all Illinois parents to talk to their school-age children about the importance of a trusted adult. Trusted adults are people whose words and actions make you feel safe, and these individuals (parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, etc.) can help you and/or your friends seek help before harm.

Recognizing that not all students may feel safe talking to their parents, teachers, coaches or mentors, now is a great time to introduce them to Safe2Help Illinois. It's free, confidential, and always available.

###